

Art Story: *The Family of Saltimbanques* by Pablo Picasso

Read by Sara Mark Lesk

You are looking at a high resolution digital reproduction of a painting made in 1905 by the Spanish artist Pablo Picasso, entitled *The Family of Saltimbanques*.

What's going on in this painting?

Picasso introduces us to a family of *saltimbanques*, or street performers, gathered together in an empty setting. *Saltimbanques* is a French word that means literally to jump over benches—which is one trick that acrobats do!

On the left side of the painting, a harlequin, or jester, wears a diamond-patterned suit. He holds the hand of a young girl in a pink dress who carries a basket of flowers. A large clown in a red costume and two young acrobats—one holding a tumbling barrel—complete the circle. A woman with a hat decorated with flowers sits off to one side.

Look again at the painting. Examine each character's pose, hand and foot gestures, and facial expressions. Some of their gestures echo one another, but their eyes never meet. There is both a sense of connection and of isolation. Shouldn't these entertainers be juggling, tumbling, dancing, ta-da-ing with broad smiles on their faces—demonstrating the gaiety and energy of a circus? Instead, Picasso presents them in a still, contemplative moment.

And where might they be? Are they stranded, in the middle of a desert, or lost on a desolate beach? Picasso gives us few clues.

Picasso stated, "Colors, like features, follow the changes of the emotions." He made this painting early in his career, during a time often described as his Blue and Rose periods. He was exploring the way color and line could express his ideas and emotions. In his Blue Period, Picasso experimented with cool blue tones, creating a series of paintings that evoked sad, melancholy moods. A few years later, Picasso began to paint with warmer, more delicate colors, such as rosy pinks, oranges, reds, and browns. *The Family of Saltimbanques* combines his Blue and Rose Period palettes. It is one of the most important paintings of his early career.